

CHEESE RABBITS

By Ambrose Heath

The sight of a packet of quick-frozen, ready-cooked Welsh Rabbit, needing only to be warmed up, reminded me how far we have come from the good old days of simple toasted cheese. Even my daughter, who ought to like our own concoction of cheese, mustard, butter, and either cream or beer as the mood dictates, prefers the hotel or café version of thick cheese sauce browned rapidly under the grill.

I often wonder when Welsh Rabbit first came to be so called. Mrs Glasse gave this dish under the name in 1767: "Toast the bread on both sides, then toast the cheese on one side, lay it on the toast and with a hot iron brown the other side." A Scotch Rabbit, according to her, consisted of the same ingredients, but they were each toasted on both sides; and an English Rabbit was made thus: "Toast a slice of bread brown on both sides, then lay it in a plate before the fire, pour a glass of red wine over it, and let it soak the wine up; then cut some cheese very thin, and lay it very thick over the bread, and put it in a tin oven before the fire, and it will be toasted and browned presently."

Mrs Raffald, a contemporary, does not mention Rabbits at all, but gives under Stewed Cheese something more nearly approximating to the Rabbit of to-day. "Cut your Cheese very thin," she writes; lay it in a Toaster, set it before the Fire, pour a glass of Ale over it, let it stand 'till it is all like a light custard, then pour it on Toasts."

The plain Welsh Rabbit as we make it now can, of course, be enriched with an egg, not merely poached and set on the top, as in the case of the Buck Rabbit, but beaten up and combined with the melted cheese towards the end of the cooking. This version is diversely known as English Monkey or Cheese Muff. Both the plain and the eggy rabbit can be used cold as a sandwich filling; if liked, the bread having first been spread with butter or margarine creamed with a little onion juice. Another use for these mixtures is to spread them over baked fillets of fish, and brown quickly at the last minute.

There are a number of Rabbits of a slightly more elaborate nature, mostly emanating, I fancy, from the United States, and here are a few of them

Devilled Rabbit demands the addition of chopped mixed pickles and a seasoning of cayenne pepper and mustard. Irish Rabbit uses milk instead of beer and a touch of vinegar, made mustard, and pepper and some coarsely chopped pickled gherkins. Tuna Fish Rabbit contains no mustard, but a touch of Worcestershire sauce takes its place, and some coarsely flaked tuna fish is added to give flavour and added substance to the dish. Haddock Rabbit is made by pouring a Welsh Rabbit mixture over toasts surmounted by flakes of cooked smoked haddock (and very nice, too): Sardine Rabbit by pouring it over sardine-halves on toast in the same way, and I see no reason why flaked cooked kipper should not respond equally well to the same treatment.

Anchovy Rabbit is slightly more complicated. Spread your toasts rather thickly with margarine creamed with anchovy paste or essence; heat two tablespoonfuls of milk in a saucepan and add a breakfastcupful of grated cheese and a teaspoonful of Worcestershire sauce. When the cheese has melted, add two teaspoonfuls of chutney and two well-beaten eggs; go on stirring until the eggs are lightly set, and pour over the toasts to serve. It is, in fact, a sort of cheesy Scotch Woodcock.

Celery Rabbit is made by chopping up finely the heart of a small head of celery with a small onion, and stewing these with a little water until tender. Drain off the water, add 1oz. of margarine and 4oz. of grated cheese with the necessary seasoning, and when mixed and melted pour over toasts and brown under the grill.

Tomato Rabbit is rather nice, too. Melt three level teaspoonfuls of margarine in a saucepan and stir in the same quantity of flour. Gradually add three-quarters of a breakfastcupful of creamy milk, and when the sauce begins to thicken stir in three-quarters of a breakfastcupful of strained stewed or tinned tomatoes with an eighth of a level teaspoonful of bicarbonate of soda (to prevent curdling), two breakfastcupfuls of grated cheese, two slightly beaten eggs, and a seasoning of salt, cayenne pepper, and mustard. Serve on pieces of toast, some prior toasted brown bread.